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ABSTRACT

An anthologized classroom is one in which students are writing toward an anthology of their own essays and drawing on the anthologies of previous classes. Students choose which of their own essays to include, and the works are then photocopied, bound, and sold to the students at cost before the end of the semester. The central challenge to the student is to write an essay which another student would be interested in reading. The most difficult challenge is faced in an introduction to literature course, because students have the feeling that they have little to offer in such a setting. In reading student writing on literature, students often criticize features of the texts which the teacher wants to praise, so that the teacher attempts to persuade the students to the teacher's point of view. Students often resist strongly academic writing on literature. Instead, students tend to compliment features such as commitment, passion, and personal voice. Not all students like the same personal essays, differences which sometimes foster highly emotional debates. Students must also try to frame the essay in an eye-catching way, such as through an imaginative title. Besides contributing to a sense of community, the anthologies function as a kind of frame around the course, thus helping to define it by providing students with structure, with examples of previous discourse, and with the instructor's own experience of defining the discipline. (HB)

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Session: Publishing Student Writing within the Classroom

Paper: "The Anthologized Literature Classroom: A Community of Interpreters"

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In our panel today, we will examine the dynamics of publishing student writing within the classroom setting. The panel will explore whether publishing student writing in a formal way, through bound anthologies, has the potential to change the character of the classroom--whether it can influence such factors as the way students view their writing, whether it can change the dialogue about purpose, audience, content and form. Our intent is two-fold. On the one hand, we will look at publishing within the classroom in very concrete terms, as a teaching device or technique that anyone can bring into the classroom. We have sample anthologies to hand around and will have practical suggestions about what to do and what not to do.

But the discussion cannot be confined to the practical level, for we have discovered, as we have used anthologies in our classrooms, that publishing student work opens up the possibility of reconceptualizing subject matter of a course, the genre of academic writing, and the power relations within the classroom. In other words, students anthologies are not--or do not have to be--a neutral technique that one introduces to achieve traditional goals. Teachers as well as students may be changed once students start publishing their work. Our papers will explore, therefore, some of the theoretical implications of publishing student writing within the classroom.

I will first describe what we have come to call "the anthologized classroom" before I look specifically at the anthologized literature classroom. An anthologized classroom is one in which students are writing toward an anthology of their essays and drawing on the anthologies of previous classes. In our anthologies, the essays are self-selected; students choose which essays, if any, to include. As teachers we add a title page, a table of contents, and a running index of articles in previous anthologies (which are on permanent reserve). We ask the students to follow a consistent format and urge them to turn in clean copies of their work. (They are aware that grammatical and mechanical mistakes are much more glaring in print.) We then photocopy and bind the work and sell it to the students at cost before the semester is over. We always celebrate its appearance with a publication party at the end of the semester. In some classes we require the students to buy, as one of their

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textbooks, an anthology produced by a previous class.

We have been producing anthologies for several years now and have several which we will hand around. Among these are two composition anthologies--Life from the Inside Out and If All the Flowers Bloom in Spring, Why Is It Still Cold in March?--an introduction to literature course--Late Night with Robin Bates--two British Literature Survey I anthologies--Sex, Lies and Manuscript: From Beowulf to Belinda and I'm Okay, You're Okay, But They're Dead: A Modest Anthology--one Restoration and 18th-century British literature anthology--Fop Tarts and Other Stories: The Rake, the Fop, the Wife, and Horner--and two anthologies bearing the names of the classes-- Theories of the Reader and Madness and Literature. The anthologies are named by the students in a process which also gets them to assess what the class has meant to them.

The central challenge put to the students in their writing is that they write an essay that someone like themselves will be interested in reading. To do so, they must figure out what they have to offer a reader. I have discovered that this is an easier task in composition than it is in literature classes where students often have a feeling that they are superfluous to the work--they believe their readings will be ephemeral while the work will endure, their responses are insignificant while the work is significant. In composition, where there are more personal topics or where, at least, the subject matter is often student chosen, it is easier to get students thinking in terms of what they can offer another reader. But often, the only model they have for literary criticism is teacher-assigned individual analysis. The thought that someone else might be interested in what they have to say is harder for them to grasp here.

The students have the most difficulty understanding what they have to offer in introduction to literature, a course I will look at closely because it presents the greatest challenges but also the greatest potential, in light of the anthologized classroom, for rethinking the teaching of literature. To explore this idea, I will start with a contrast. English majors do not have as much difficulty as general students in grasping the idea that others might be interested in what they have to say about a work of literature. To draw on the terms of Donald Bartholomae, these students have been initiated into the discourse of their discipline. Majors are beginning to get a sense of critical language and to regard themselves as members of that discourse. The essays they write partake of that disccurse and indicate that they are members of it.

Introduction to literature is a different story, however, for it is here (I refer to the Peter Elbow/Bartholomae debate) that personal writing meets academic writing. I have had students who, enthusiastic about my anthologized composition classroom, expressed disappointment when they got a different experience in my anthologized literature classroom. It is almost as though, in reconceptualizing my composition class so that even research essays appear to be personal writing, all I have done is defer the personal/academic clash--or the student culture/professor culture clash--to the students' second class in English. My students in introduction to literature are often resistant to writing and to reading academic writing. It is in fact instructive--and a powerful discussion opportunity--to discuss with them the writing that previous students have done. (I have them purchase the previous class's anthology.) There are complaints that the use of too many quotations bogs down the writing, that there is too much emphasis on close-reading subtleties. Qualities which I praise, in other words, sometimes come under attack, and I am put in a position of arguing against the students. And since I have made readability a primary criterion--"How did the essay read?"--it is not enough to simply explain the genre demands such elements. The genre itself comes under scrutiny.

It would be easy to resort to the Bartholomae paradigm and just say that the students have to be initiated--perhaps kicking and screaming--into academic discourse and that once they are, they will appreciate academic criticism. Such a position is not without merit, but it overlooks some legitimate complaints. Not only introductory students find academic criticism boring. English majors, too, react against it in the anthologies and, if the truth be told, we ourselves are not always uplifted by essays which have mastered the genre. I am arguing here that, in the anthologized classroom, conversations take place which can prompt us to rethink the genres that we demand from students.

When I asked one class of introductory literature students to note the qualities they liked best about the essays in a student anthology, they pointed to such attributes as commitment, passion, and strong personal voice. The students liked essays where writers described the personal connections that they had to works. They also appreciated essays which were simple and straightforward, which flowed well, and which were free of grammatical and mechanical errors. For the most part, they preferred the belletristic essays to the more conventional thesis-support or comparison/contrast essays. Although sometimes they would voice respect for the latter, the essays they mentioned most were the more personal explorations.

Not all students liked the same personal essays, however. For instance, there were two essays in one anthology on Lucille Clifton's collected poems that gained a lot of attention. One writer, an African-American woman, had written about how much Clifton's strength meant to her. Quoting liberally from the poetry, she talked of the issues that she, as a black woman, faces and how Clifton had given her the poetry to work through certain problems. The other writer, a European-American woman, was alternately repulsed by Clifton's early political poetry and attracted by her later personal poetry. She argued that Clifton had softened as she matured.

Some students were attracted by the first essay and spoke admiringly of its passion, commitment, and strong voice. These were qualities, they said, that they would strive for in their own writing. Other students found the first essay strident and were comforted, in the second essay, that someone else had their reading experience. They spoke of the calm reasoning and honesty of an essay which said things they had thought but were afraid to say. The essays focused different positions in the class, an insistence on dwelling on racial injustice vs. a desire to bypass the debate. These differences go to the heart of race relations in the United States. The class debates that emerged looked both at the poetry and how to write about it.

Similar experiences occured in a course for non-majors that I taught on "Literature by Minorities in America." In this course, which was 50% black, 50% white, there had been highly emotional debates. In reading the anthology produced by the class, the students came to see each other as thoughtful, concerned, and open to other points of view.

I remember especially the final comments of one black student upon reading the anthology. She was from a lower income family from Washington, D.C. and carried around a deep anger, in part because her father had been murdered when she was a child, in part because she felt out of place amongst the middle class white and black students at St. Mary's. But after reading student essays on how authors wrestled with issues of ethnic identity and racial conflict, she acknowledged that her peers were not as insensitive as she had thought and she noted that she, herself, was made up of many different cultures, white as well as black. I found the admission a courageous and powerful step toward healing.

In the classes for majors, the issues are different. In British Literature Survey I, I note that each generation has to come to terms with the canon in its own way and that their anthology is a generational statement. Through this published collection they get a more concrete sense of how reputations rise

and fall and how they are part of that process. To see a series of essays attacking Milton for his portrayal of women, puzzling over Chaucer's attitude toward strong women, or praising Donne for his sexual openness, makes them feel as though they are members of a community of interpreters and have influence in that community.

To emphasize how opinions shift, I included in one anthology an essay I had written in graduate school in 1978, arguing that the Wife of Bath has latent homosexual tendencies. One of my students took strong exception to the piece and countered that, far from "wanting to be a man," the Wife of Bath had simply taken the only option open to a woman who wanted power in a man's world. Our disagreement made me aware that the tale looked different to one who had grown up before the feminist revolution and one who had grown up after it. The other students, meanwhile, read both essays and received a sense of how critics establish a dialogue.

Once students have been enjoined to write something that will be of interest to others, they take up the imaginative challenge of framing the essay in eye-catching ways. Titles which have pulled in readers include the following: "Rochester, the Dice Man of the Restoration"; "Please Ladies, Where's Your Honor" (an essay on Moll Flanders); "Mystery, Manners and Romance: Evelina as an 18th-Century Soap Opera"; "Sympathy for the Devil: The Decline and Fall of Satan's Magnificence"; "A Teacher or a Thug: The Intentions of the Green Knight"; "A Tale of Seduction, Immortality, and Integrity" (again Gawain).

As the anthologies have evolved in my classrooms, I have found myself recommending more varied pieces of writing, working on the premise that there are many ways into a work. It also appeals to my sense of being an editor--I am in charge of a magazine and am looking for pacing and variety. The following are pieces that have made their way into the anthologies, along with the more traditional essays: a modern blues version of "Barbara Allen," an imaginary exchange of advice letters between Aphra Behn and "Lost in Love," an original poem on Satan's fall, a poetic rebuttal by Belinda against Pope's portrayal of her in Rape of the Lock, a list of headlines on how certain issues in Restoration and 18th-Century British literature would play in today's women's magazines and talks shows, a poem on the "not so cavalier poets." I also encourage students to comb through their journals to find particularly good journal entries, or excerpts from entries, and I will sometimes compile lists of catchy one liners. Sometimes I will write essays myself for the anthology, such as one on the rules of ombre and how the game gets played out in Rape of the Lock.

The anthologies bring out both creative play and serious interchange and open up for students a sense of richness as to possible responses to literature. The anthologies have a similar impact on the teacher. Perhaps there is no better testimony to the anthology than the following: as I sat down to work up this talk, I became buried in the past essays of my students, remembering faces and classes as I did so. In addition to contributing to a sense of community, the anthologies function as a kind of frame, put both around the individual paper and around the course. As tangible evidence of the class--the collectivity made manifest--the anthologies mark the individual essay, and the class as a whole, as events. They do this for the teacher as well as the student. I have been teaching 11 years, and classes I have taught begin to blend in with each other. The anthologies mark the moments, each with its own character and its own chemistry.

In the end, most of the anthologized essays combine close reading and thematic analysis with personal experience. In so doing, they mirror literary criticism in general, which has loosened up considerably in recent years and now often features personal reminiscence, verbal play, and experimenting with the genre of the academic article itself. Students take very readily to such play. But even more to the point are the new insights that such play opens up. Literature is hard to organize, as Irving Howe once wrote, and the efforts to tame or domesticate it, as certain deconstructionists might say, can repress its non-rational qualities. Students can open up possibilities here, especially if they feel that they, as a collective entity, have exploratory freedom. The teacher, meanwhile, stands to learn from the publications that students produce. In return, he or she provides the students with structure, with the discourse that has gone before, and with his or her own experiences of defining the discipline.

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